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RELIGIOUS SERVICES IN THE BYZANTINE ARMY

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The role of the Christian religion in the private and public life of the inhabitants of what we call the Byzantine Empire can scarcely be exaggerated. It permeated all aspects of that civilization, including the one which, perhaps more than any other, was responsible for its millennial survival, that is, the military.¹ The men who served in the Byzantine army and navy were very conscious of their responsibility to defend, not simply a plot of land or a state, but Christianity itself and the Christian people.² It is not surprising that such a determination and mission should manifest itself in external signs and observances.

Religious practices, of course, played an important role in armies before the advent of Christianity. This was certainly true of the Roman army, which evolved into the medieval Byzantine army. But there was a difference. While the pagan Roman army, as many other armies, was content with external rituals and acclamations, the Byzantine commanders and emperors insisted that, in addition to religious practices, their troops must also possess the proper interior disposition; they must be pure in spirit and free from sin.

About the beginning of the tenth century the emperor Leo VI enumerated the various skills which war by its very nature requires: tactics, weaponry, engineering, and the like. Among these he also posited the « hieratic », that is, the sacred or priestly, for it is this which enables the army to perform its

¹ See, in general, H. HUNGER, *Reich der neuen Mitte* (Graz, 1965); for Christian influence on the military, 191-195.

² See LEO VI, *Tactical Constitutions*, ed. R. VÁRI, *Leonis imp. Tactica*, 2 vols. (Budapest, 1917-22), libri I-XIV, 38; complete in PG, 107, 669-1120 (hereafter Leo, *Tactica*). See also G. DENNIS, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, 1985; CFHB, 25), p. 216, 320.

religious duties properly and devoutly, and in a manner traditional among pious Christians and pleasing to God.³ This objective was to be attained by sacred words and sacred deeds (ἱερολογιῶν καὶ ἱεουργιῶν), that is, scripture, preaching, and the eucharistic liturgy, and by other prayers and supplications to God and « to his immaculate mother the Theotokos and all his saints. Thus the divinity will be propitiated, and the faith of the soldiers in their salvation will strengthen their souls, and they will be better prepared to face dangers ».⁴

The change in religion effected by the acceptance of Christianity by Constantine, after his reputed vision of the cross before his victory at the Milvian Bridge, 28 October 312, was soon reflected in the army. The *labarum*, of course, was the obvious new external symbol, and the army became officially Christian, although clearly many pagan soldiers and sentiments remained. Christian soldiers were encouraged to participate in the liturgy on Sundays, and a sort of chaplain corps was organized. While the Christian troops were at Mass, their pagan comrades assembled to recite a monotheistic prayer in Latin.⁵

Sacred symbols were important in maintaining proper religious attitudes and morale. Of these the cross was the symbol par excellence. The army marched out to war, either from an expeditionary camp or from the capital itself, with the standard of the cross at its head. The emperor Maurice rode out behind the wood of the cross, presumably in a precious casing, raised on a golden spear.⁶ At the end of the tenth century John Tzimiskes went in solemn procession and prayed at several churches that the angel of victory might go before his men; then, raising the standard of the cross, he marched forth on campaign.⁷ Crosses were often depicted on flags, and, early in

³ LEO, *Tactica*, epil. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵ EUSEBIUS, *Vita Constantini*, ed. I.A. HEIKEL, GCS, Bd. 7 (Leipzig, 1902), 4, 18-19; 56; p. 124, 140.

⁶ *Theophylacti Simocattae historiae*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1887), 5, 16, 11; p. 219-220. On the veneration of the cross see N. THIERRY, « Le culte de la Croix dans l'empire byzantin du vii^e siècle au x^e dans ses rapports avec la guerre contre l'infidèle. Nouveaux témoignages archéologiques », *Rivista di studi bizantini e slavi*, 1 (1980), 205-228.

⁷ *Leonis diaconi historiae*, 8, 1; ed. C. Hase (Bonn, 1828), p. 128-129.

the tenth century, if not before, some flags were surmounted by a gold or silver cross instead of a spear point. The cross alone, adorned with gold and precious stones, seems to have been used as if it were a flag. A large cross, for example, was borne before the troops of Nikephoros Phokas as they charged against the Muslims in Crete. In 910 many « crosses » were captured by the Arabs, and in 965 several such crosses were recovered by the Byzantines.⁸

Relics too, other than that of the cross, were venerated. A large number of relics, especially of Christ's passion, were sent by Constantine Porphyrogenitus to the army of the East.⁹ But, after the cross, icons were the most prominent and revered symbols. At the end of the sixth century, Philippikos carried an image of Christ through the ranks as he ordered his men into combat against the Persians.¹⁰ The emperor Heraclius also relied on an image of Christ to inspire his men in battle.¹¹ The caesar Bardas, about to lead an expedition against Crete, prayed before the icon of the Hodegitria.¹² Such visits were customary before setting out on campaign. Icons served as standards by themselves, or else woven or painted on banners. The soldiers under the command of Petronas on campaign against the Arabs were told by a monk to paint an image of St. John on their shields.¹³ On 13 April 989 Basil II confronted the forces of the rebel Phokas with a sword in one hand and an icon of Mary in the other.¹⁴ Very popular among the troops

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 3; p. 8; *Ioannis Skylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, ed. J. Thurn (Berlin, 1973), p. 270, 40; A.A. VASILIEV, *Byzance et les Arabes, II, La Dynastie Macédonienne, 1. Extraits des sources arabes* (Brussels, 1950), p. 59.

⁹ R. VÁRI, « Zum historischen Exzerptenwerk des Konstantinos Porphyrogenetos », *BZ*, 17 (1908), 75-85, esp. 83, 20-31.

¹⁰ *Theophylacti Simocattae historiae*, 2, 3, 4-8; p. 73-74; *Theophanes, Chronographia*, ed. C. deBoor, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1882-83), A.M. 6078; p. 255, 13-19.

¹¹ *Giorgio di Pisidia, Poemi, I. Panegirici epici*, ed. A. Pertusi (Ettal, 1959), *Exp. Pers.*, 1, 139-51, p. 91; 2, 85-87, p. 101; *Heracl.*, 1, 218, p. 250.

¹² *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), 4, 41; p. 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4, 25; p. 180-181.

¹⁴ MICHAEL PSELLUS, *Chronography*, 1, 16; ed. E. RENAULD, *Michel Psellos, Chronographie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1926-28), 1, p. 110; S. IMPELLIZZERI, *Michele Psello, Imperatori di Bisanzio*, 2 vols. (s.l., 1984), 1, p. 26.

was devotion to the military saints, such as George, Demetrius, or Theodore.¹⁵

From the time of Constantine, priests accompanied the soldiers in the field and also served in the fleet.¹⁶ They led prayers, imparted absolution, and celebrated the eucharistic liturgy. In 1071, on the way to Mantzikert, while the emperor was exhorting his troops, a priest was heard chanting the gospel of that day's liturgy (John 15,20-21).¹⁷ In the course of his Bulgarian campaigns (1001-1018), Basil II had the hermit Photios come down from his mountain retreat to accompany the army and to assist it by his prayers.¹⁸ Presumably the priests also attended to the sick and wounded, bringing them communion and administering the last rites and, finally, they buried the dead. Leo VI insisted that the priests should be pure, respected for their way of life and, « being sanctified themselves, they shall celebrate the mysteries » properly.¹⁹

We know of one such military chaplain, admittedly not typical, St. Luke the Stylite. (ca. 900-979).²⁰ Called to military service at the age of eighteen, he served in an expedition against the Bulgarians. On returning home he was greatly influenced by a stylite monk, and adopted his ascetic way of life. At twenty-four years of age he was ordained a priest and, while continuing his austerities, he served as a chaplain to the army. He refused the customary imperial allowance, but obtained provisions from his parents' estate. These he distributed to the poor and indigent among the soldiers. As many a chaplain, then, he dealt with more than the spiritual needs of the troops. Still, each Sunday he celebrated the eucharistic liturgy for them.

To celebrate the liturgy, field chapels with portable altars had to be set up, and indeed the sources speak of such. While

¹⁵ Cfr. H. DELEHAYE, *Les Légendes grecques des saints militaires* (Paris, 1909).

¹⁶ EUSEBIUS, *Vita Constantini*, loc. cit.; see also note 32 below.

¹⁷ *Michaelis Attaliothae historia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1853), p. 154, 17.

¹⁸ V. GRUMEL, *Le fondateur et la date de fondation du monastère thessalonicien d'Akapniou*, *EOr*, 30 (1931), 91-95.

¹⁹ LEO, *Tactica*, epil. 68.

²⁰ His Life is edited by H. Delehaye, *Les saints stylites* (Brussels, 1923), 195-237; see esp. 200-201.

campaigning in Persian territory, Constantine I had a tent specially prepared for use as a church.²¹ During the reign of Justinian, the poet Corippus writes of soldiers erecting a temporary chapel for liturgical services before combat.²² For the expedition to Crete in 949 a schedule of payments was drawn up for the imperial fleet. This included a sum for « the churches », that is, chapels, but, since this occurs in a section dealing with personnel, it must mean payment for the clergy serving in those chapels.²³ Among the equipment to be transported on a military expedition led by the emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenitus lists an « imperial church with sacred furnishings », that is, a mobile chapel; this also included liturgical books. In addition, pack animals were allocated for various officials, including four priests, clearly meant to officiate in the chapel.²⁴ Diagrams of expeditionary camps, which show the locations of the imperial tent and of various units, do not show a place for a chapel, but neither do they indicate the location of kitchens, medical facilities, storage areas, or latrines.

Religious services in camp are prescribed in the military manuals from the *Strategikon* of Maurice to the treatises of Leo VI, Nikephoros Phokas, and others in the tenth century.²⁵ The

²¹ SOCRATES, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1, 18; PG, 67, 124c.

²² Corippus, *Johannidos seu de bellis Lybicus libri VIII*, ed. J. Diggle and F. Goodyear (Cambridge, 1970), 8, 220-23, p. 173.

²³ Constantini Porphyrogeniti, *De cerimoniis aulae byzantinae*, 2 vols. ed. J. Reiske (Bonn, 1829-30), 2, 45; 2, p. 667, 17.

²⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, ed. J. Haldon (Vienna, 1990; CFHB, 28), p. 106, 183; 195-96; p. 118, 379. The twelfth century canonist, Theodore Balsamon, allowed the clergy on campaign with the emperor to celebrate the liturgy in a tent set apart as an imperial church: resp. 13; PG, 138, 965c. About the same time John Kinnamos mentions a chapel which was inside the emperor's tent, but separated by a veil: *Epitome rerum a Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum*, ed. A. Meineke (Bonn, 1836), p. 53, 21-22.

²⁵ In general, see A. HEISENBERG, « Kriegsgottesdienst in Byzanz », *Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Sprachgeschichte vornehmlich des Orients* Ernst Kuhn zum 70. Geburtstag... gewidmet (Munich, 1916), 244-57; J. VIEILLEFOND, « Les pratiques religieuses dans l'armée byzantine d'après les traités militaires », *Revue des Etudes Anciens*, 37 (1935), 322-30; P. GOUBERT, « Reli-

day began and ended with each *bandon* or *tagma* singing the Trisagion, « Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us ». This was to be done before any other activity in the morning, and in the evening after supper and the dismissal.²⁶ In addition, the *Strategikon* prescribes other « customary practices », but does not specify them. Among them were probably evening prayers, like those recited in the Byzantine family, and which did not need to be led by a priest. One such prayer was attributed to the emperor Constantine VIII (1025-28), and is in the form of a *kathisma* to be sung in the first tone.²⁷ The suppliant addresses the Lord, « who fought alongside Joshua the son of Nave », and prays that he « send forth his angel of peace to give strength to his people in battle » and to bring them victory for his glory.

The *kantatores*, who had once urged soldiers to fight courageously for the glory of Rome, adopted a more Christian tone. They were to remind the men of the rewards awaiting them for their faith in God, and to assure them that their struggle is on behalf of God, and that it gives proof of their love for him and for the whole nation and for their brothers in the faith. Eternal will be the memory of those fighting valiantly for the freedom of their brothers against the enemies of God.²⁸ The clergy, too, were to stress these and similar themes in their sermons.

In the days before battle, and particularly on the night before, special prayers of supplication, or litanies, were to be offered.²⁹ One such military service, composed about the end of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century, has been preserved in the form of an *akolouthia* meant to be sung at vespers the evening before combat.³⁰ Beginning with the image of David defeating Goliath, the office prays for the victory of

gion et superstitions dans l'armée byzantine à la fin du vi^e siècle », OCP, 13 (1947), 495-500.

²⁶ *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, ed. G. Dennis (Vienna, 1981; *Corpus font. hist. byz.*, 17), 7B, 17; 12, 22; LEO, *Tactica*, 12, 115; 11, 21.

²⁷ Edited by Heisenberg, « Kriegsgottesdienst », 248.

²⁸ LEO, *Tactica*, 12, 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14, 1; et alibi.

³⁰ Edited by A. PERTUSI, « Una *akolouthia* militare inedita del X secolo », *Aevum*, 22 (1948), 145-68.

the cross over the barbarian foe and the aliens who blaspheme Christ and his mother. It begs God to save his people and to grant victory to the emperors on both land and sea.

The religious obligations of the Byzantine soldier are specified in the *Strategikon* of the late sixth century, undoubtedly representing earlier practice, and in greater detail in the military manuals of the tenth century. They must have almost certainly remained the same in the intervening period, and they probably continued into later centuries. As mentioned, prayers were to be recited every morning and evening. In the days before battle these were intensified and directed more to the approaching combat. The eucharistic liturgy was celebrated on Sundays and holy days throughout the year. But as combat drew near, there were special liturgical offices, specified in the tenth century manuals.

Most of the religious practices seem well established by the end of the sixth century or beginning of the seventh when the *Strategikon* of Maurice was composed. Among the practical steps to be taken before battle, the first was to have the flags of the various units blessed, a practice still prescribed in the tenth century.³¹ Moreover, before the Byzantine fleet set sail, the priests were to sanctify or bless the flags on all the warships.³² It is not clear whether the priests continued to serve on board the ships during the voyage.

The evening before battle the priests were to lead the men in litanies and prayers of supplication.³³ Nikephoros Phokas ordered that all the troops should cry out « Kyrie eleison » (Lord have mercy) a hundred times.³⁴ They were to do so with attention, fear of God, and also with tears.³⁵ Anyone caught

³¹ *Strategikon*, 7A, 11; LEO, *Tactica*, 13, 1; *Strategemata*, ed. J. de Foucault (Paris, 1949), *Parecbolae*, 36, p. 114.

³² *Naumachica*, ed. A. Dain (Paris, 1943), Leo VI, 24, p. 23; Nikephoros Ouranos, 22, p. 76. According to Leo, the flags should be made holy by suppliant prayer and the sacred liturgy of the priests (θείας τῶν ἱερέων ἱεραρχίας); Ouranos would have the flags « liturgized » (λειτουρηθῶσι).

³³ LEO, *Tactica*, 14, 1.

³⁴ *Nicephori Praecepta militaria e codice Mosquensi*, ed. J. Kulakovskij (St. Petersburg, 1900), p. 20, 22.

³⁵ On the importance of tears in Byzantine spirituality see T. ŠPIDLÍK, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1986), 193-94.

doing anything else at that time was to be severely punished. More important, though, than any external practice was the insistence that the soldiers be properly disposed and spiritually prepared. Before fighting for their faith under the standard of the cross, they had to be pure and free from passion and sin, and it was the particular responsibility of the commanding officer to see to this. As danger drew near, he was to worship God, and thus set an example for his men.³⁶ In 811, on his way to join the army of Nikephoros I preparing to invade Bulgaria, the soldier Nicholas resisted the erotic advances of an innkeeper's daughter. « Do you not see », he said, « that I am headed toward barbarian tribes and war and bloodshed, and that I am dependent on God? How could I pollute my flesh while about to go into battle? » While most of the army was massacred, Nicholas escaped.³⁷ Nikephoros Phokas urged his soldiers to expel all quarrelsomeness, hatred, and strife from their souls, do penance, and reform their lives. And he further decreed, strange as it may seem to us, that they should fast for three days before battle, eating dry food only once a day, in the evening.³⁸ Such insistence on spiritual purity and sanctification was not meant simply as a morale booster or even for the eternal salvation of the individual soldier, but it was considered essential for victory. For the Byzantines, as other peoples, firmly believed that above all else, God's favor was necessary to prevail in battle. This favor was not bestowed on sinners. Thus the prayer, fasting, and repentance were just as necessary as the best weaponry, training, and tactics. Maurice, for example, insisted that the most important concern of the commander should be the love of God. « He should strive to win the favor of God, without which it is impossible to carry out any plan, ... or to overcome any enemy.³⁹

The repentance of the soldiers should lead to their receiving absolution of their sins, for surely this is what is meant by

³⁶ *Strategikon*, 8, 2, 1; *LEO, Tactica*, 14, 1; 20, 172; *Sylloge Tacticorum. Quae olim « inedita Leonis tactica » dicebatur*, ed. A. Dain (Paris, 1938), 44, 1.

³⁷ L. CLUGNET, « Histoire de St. Nicholas, soldat et moine », *ROC*, 7 (1902), 323-30.

³⁸ *Nicephori Praecepta*, p. 21, 5-13.

³⁹ *Strategikon*, praef. 36-39.

being made holy and purified (ἀγνίζω, καθαγνίζω, ἀγιάζω) by the blessing (εὐλογία) of the priests.⁴⁰ They will then be convinced that God will aid them and they will advance with confidence against the foe. Granted the tens of thousands of soldiers in the camp and the constraints of time and space, perhaps also the number of priests available, it seems likely that, rather than individual auricular confession, a general absolution was imparted to all.

In the sixth century, Corippus provides a poetic account of a liturgy before combat. At dawn the soldiers set up a chapel in the center of the camp, to which the banners of the various units were brought. The troops were divided into choruses and sang hymns. When the commander arrived, the soldiers loudly bewailed their sins and cried out for God's forgiveness. The commander knelt down, bowed low, wept, and prayed. « At long last look upon the Romans; look upon them, most High, and graciously come to their aid. Father, I pray, smash the proud nations by your strength. May the peoples recognize you alone as the powerful lord, while you crush the enemy and in battle save those who are your own ». All joined in tearful prayer and then received communion.⁴¹

The day, or night, before battle the priests celebrated the eucharistic liturgy in the camp, and all the men were strongly encouraged to receive communion. If the battle was not expected to begin until later in the day, the, liturgy might be celebrated that morning.⁴²

On the day of battle, before any troops leave the compound, prayers were to be said, led by the priests, as well as by the commander and other officers. All were to recite « Kyrie eleison » for some time in unison. Then each division was to shout « Nobiscum Deus » (God is with us) three times as it marched out of the camp.⁴³ A variant of this was « Deus adjuta Romanis » (God aid the Romans). By the tenth century, at the

⁴⁰ LEO, *Tactica*, 20, 172.

⁴¹ Corippus, *Johannidos*, 8, 213-14; 254-55; 318-36; p. 173-79.

⁴² Nicephori *Praecepta*, p. 21, 13-16; *Sylloge Tacticorum*, 44, 1; Ouranos, paraphrase of Leo, *Tactica*, ed. by Vári together with the *Tactica*, 14, 1; CORIPPUS, *Johannidos*, 8, 256-58, p. 174-75.

⁴³ *Strategikon*, 2, 18.

moment of contact, the men were to shout: σταυρὸς νενίκηκε or σταυρὸς νικῶ, « The cross is victorious »⁴⁴ Phokas ordered that, as the enemy approached, all his men were to pray aloud: « Lord have mercy, Christ our god, have mercy on us ». And then charge in silence. When the trumpet sounded they were to repeat the prayer and then say: « Receive us Christians, making us worthy to stand up on behalf of our faith and our brothers and to fight until death, confirming and strengthening our souls and our hearts and our whole body, o God, mighty in battle and unequalled in strength, through the intercession of the one who bore you, the mother of God, and of all the saints, Amen ». ⁴⁵

If victorious, prayers of thanksgiving were to be offered by the commander and his men ⁴⁶. After his victory over the Russians in April 971 John Tzimiskes offered prayers of thanksgiving to St. George, whose feast day it was. ⁴⁷ A solemn service of thanksgiving was held when the emperor returned to Constantinople from a victorious campaign. ⁴⁸ For example, the year after his victory over the Russians, Tzimiskes entered the city triumphantly preceded by an icon of Mary on a festively decorated cart. ⁴⁹

Finally, as after any battle, the commander had to see that a proper religious burial was given to those who had fallen. ⁵⁰ The soldiers massacred in Bulgaria in 811, many of whom as captives refused to abjure their Christian faith, were solemnly commemorated in the liturgy in Constantinople. ⁵¹ Early in the

⁴⁴ LEO, *Tactica*, 12, 68; 106; Ouranos, 12, 68 (Vári has ὁ στρατός, surely a mistake for σταυρός); Skylitzes, p. 139, 8.

⁴⁵ *Nicephori Praecepta*, p. 15, 18-29.

⁴⁶ LEO, *Tactica*, 16, 2; *Strategemata*, parecbolae, 47, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Skylitzes, 300, 65.

⁴⁸ For example, the ceremonies for the triumphal return of Justinian, Basil I, and Theophilos are described in *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, ed. Haldon, p. 138-50, with commentary.

⁴⁹ Skylitzes, 310, 61.

⁵⁰ *Strategikon*, 7B, 6; LEO, *Tactica*, 14, 35; *Strategemata*, parecbolae, 50, p. 118.

⁵¹ « Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae », ed. H. Delehay, *Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris* (Brussels, 1902), July 26, no. 10, p. 846-47.

tenth century a special liturgical office for the Saturday before Lent, the day on which the faithful departed are commemorated, was composed by an unknown author.⁵² It was dedicated to the soldiers and officers who had died in battle or in captivity, the warriors of the Lord who gave their lives in defending his people. The office is a lengthy supplication to Christ to call those brave soldiers to himself and to grant them a place with all his saints in his heavenly kingdom.

⁵² « Un office byzantin inédit pour ceux qui sont morts à la guerre, dans le *cod. sin. gr. 734-735* », *Mus* 101 (1988), 183-211.